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## **Learning Craft From Children's Authors**

**Sarah Dyer**

### **Abstract**

When researching and writing my first MA Writing for Young People essay, I made two observations: my peers and I were overwhelmed with how to go about it and, through the process, I learned more specific and applicable techniques for the craft of children's writing than I had from craft manuals. To write my essay, I utilised my knowledge of teaching essay structure to teens. I share the process I took to create my Writing for Young People essay in order to illustrate how a scholar can apply the same steps to their own interests. Steps that I discuss include developing a focus question, reading and researching, collating observations and making conclusions, and outlining, drafting, and polishing. Though some of the steps I offer seem obvious, I collect them to support new scholars in efficiently writing an essay and to support them in unlocking a way to learn from children's authors. Throughout I model from my own essay, sharing the strategies I learned about using animal companions to develop the protagonist in Middle Grade novels. I end with one example of how I have applied what I learned to my current manuscript.

**Keywords:** *academia, essay, character development, animal companion*

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## Introduction

I am Sarah Currie Dyer, a student on Bath Spa University's MA in Writing for Young People program. Previously, I spent twelve years in the classroom teaching English to twelve to thirteen-year-olds. There were two reasons why I chose to talk about learning craft from children's authors or how to write an essay. The first reason was last year I had to write an academic essay. It had been years since I had done so. I felt out of my depth and a number of my peers, though for different reasons, felt the same. I was able to lean on the basics I taught to students about how to write an essay. Not everyone had those resources, and I thought that I could share those tools with others. The second reason is, through that process, I discovered a way that I can learn from children's authors, and I can go back to that process again and again to learn new things.

## Aims

The aims of this talk are to provide the practical steps for defining, researching, and writing an academic essay, and to illustrate how that process unlocked for me a way to learn from children's authors.

## Writing the Essay

I start with writing the essay and break that into four parts: developing your focus question, reading and researching, collating observations and making conclusions, and outlining, drafting, and polishing.

## Developing a Focus Question

When writing an essay, the first place to start is to develop a focus question. I would argue this is one of the most important parts because that question drives everything. When you think of a focus question, keep in mind what you want to learn. This requires being vulnerable with yourself. What are your weaknesses? Where do you need to improve? The farther along that path you go the more 'Aha!' moments you will have and the more you will learn. You also need to make sure your topic is not covered already in writing manuals, to push past what others have already found. The key to a good question is to make it specific.

To model using my own essay, I started with the idea that I wanted to learn about creating believable characters. That is something that I find hard, and I wanted to learn more. That is not a great topic because it is already covered widely. Two of my favourite books that teach you about writing believable characters are Will Storr's *The Science of Storytelling* (2019) and Lisa Cron's *Story Genius* (2016). In *The Science of Storytelling*, Storr helps you dig into characters and think about their flaws. In *Story Genius*, Cron helps you think about characters' emotionality, helping you run that through your novel. I needed to come up with a focus question that would take me past these resources. To do that, I asked myself questions like, What patterns or trends had I

noticed in children's literature that I had been reading? And, Who was I writing for? Through prompting myself and asking these questions I came up with my driving question: How do Middle Grade authors use animal companions to develop their protagonist's character? That specificity guided me through my reading and research, helped me draw conclusions, and finally write my paper.

### Reading and Researching

There are two parts to reading and researching: primary texts and secondary text. For me, it was important to choose primary texts that I respected. I picked four that had been up for awards, been recommended by children themselves, or been recommended on programs like my masters. Make sure your primary texts have elements that you want to study. Are they published in the country you want to learn about? Are they for the age group in which you are interested? I was writing about animal companions, so I needed to make sure my texts had an animal friend. Check that the texts you pick have all the qualities you need. Read these primary texts like a reader so that you have the joy of the stories and you come to the work as the reader. Later you can analyse them. What I did was, as I read, I gave a little star in the margin anytime there was an animal companion and kept reading. That way I had an indicator for myself to go back to when I was drawing conclusions and making notes, but it did not stop me from feeling the stories as I was reading.

For the secondary texts, there are a couple of notes I have for you. The first is to listen to your librarian. Trust them, ask for help, and take their advice. This can be enormously helpful. The best tip I had passed on to me was from Lecturer, Lucy Cuthew. She suggested creating one document where you keep all your notes. You want to keep the reference material there so you can go back to it and cite it correctly, and then put your direct quotations all in one place. Make sure that it is all direct quotations, so you do not get confused with your personal notes. If you record important direct quotations when you first come across them, you can find them later. If you do not take quotations that make an impact on your thinking while you read them, they will be hard to find later. Also, you have no idea what connections you will draw at the end of the process, and if the direct quotations are in one place, they can spark ideas. The process is about learning. It is not about the essay at the end. Reading secondary texts was one of the best processes for me because I did read widely, and it pushed me in my topic to read pieces I may never have picked up. Through that process I came to see what different writers and thinkers all thought about character. If you use the time to read secondary texts well, it is a place where you learn a lot.

### Collating Observations and Making Conclusions

Collating observations and making conclusions was where I had the most fun. The hard work of reading all my primary and secondary texts was behind me, and the hard work of writing the essay was ahead of me. This was where I had the 'Aha!' moments and saw what the authors were doing and analysed for myself what I saw on the page. This

stage looks different for each person because it is how we think and how we make connections. In case it helps you, my process was to start with my primary texts and look through all of my starred pages. Then I analysed what I saw. I asked questions like what was the author doing? Or how were they using the animal in that moment to develop their protagonist? I put those observations in notes. After I had those notes, I looked for patterns between the texts. As an example, if the animal was used to reflect the main character's emotions, I looked for other books that used the same technique. Then I put those observations together. Other times, I looked for the techniques that no one else used.

Lastly, I went back to my notes from the secondary texts. I knew what I thought about the techniques the authors were using, and I looked for what was out there that supported what I found and what was out there that disagreed with what I found. Drawing parallels between secondary texts are really interesting when you are writing an essay because they push you to think about what you really believe and why. Maybe you will end up disagreeing or agreeing with the secondary texts, but the process pushes your thinking further along.

### Outlining, Drafting, and Polishing

For this stage, I leaned the most on my teaching career and what I had taught. I found that what works for young people also worked for me.

When outlining you want to create a document where you can show your topic, supporting ideas, and direct quotations. I highly recommend making an outline as detailed as possible. When written, a detailed outline will double in word count. For example, I wanted to write a four thousand word essay, so I knew that my outline needed to be about two thousand words. Outlining can save a lot of time. When writing my essay, I realised at the outlining stage that there were two sections that I did not need to write because I could see that my essay would be too long. Also outlines help you see the flow of ideas and what works together, and they help you check your thinking to make sure you convey what you mean.

If you have a detailed outline, drafting is like paint by numbers. You add your topic sentences, transitions, and conclusions, but otherwise your main thinking is already there. An outline is an amazing guide to move you through your draft.

Polishing is also extremely important. My best tip is to read work aloud. Hearing your work read aloud helps you catch mistakes, whether the mistakes are in your analysis and thinking or whether they are in your grammar or typos. You can also colour code your essay for thesis and topic sentences, supporting evidence and analysis, and conclusions to be sure you have the balance you want. Lastly, have a writing colleague read it because they will catch things you did not see. They will also reflect back to you those 'Aha!' moments that you had earlier in the process when the ideas were fresh, and you will see for yourself how your ideas land for someone who has not done the work that you have.

## Learning Craft from Children's Authors

The first part of my talk consisted of the basics: the nuts and bolts of writing an essay. I hope, whether you are coming to this as an academic yourself or someone who is newer to academia, that at least one strategy will stick and will be something you take on with you through your writing career.

Finally, I want to return to how I learned craft from children's authors through this process. To do that, I will start by showcasing seven writing techniques that I learned when writing my essay. While I only go over them briefly here, they are more thoroughly explored in my essay "How do Middle Grade authors use animal companions to develop the protagonist's character?" (Dyer, 2023b). From reading *The House of Chicken Legs* by Sophie Anderson (2018), *The Last Bear* by Hannah Gold (2021), *Julia and the Shark* by Kiran Millwood Hargrave (2021), and *The Last Firefox* by Lee Newbery (2022) and going through the process I explained, I came up with seven strategies for how authors use the protagonist's animal companion to develop character:

- animals show the protagonist's emotions or mood;
- they mirror the protagonist's needs or wants;
- they help the protagonist make sense of their world;
- they offer solace as an imagined friend;
- they serve as a metaphor for a real life issue;
- they allude to myths and folklore in order to develop the world; and
- they save or rescue the protagonist (Dyer, 2023a).

I like to think that I am a close reader. I have taught note-taking, close reading, and analysis for twelve years, but I never would have come up with the depth and specificity of those seven strategies from only reading the books. I may have been moved by the passages where those moments happened, but I wouldn't have figured out what the author was doing, how they were executing it on the page, and been able to use the strategy myself. For me, this process of going step by step to come up with an essay helped me learn concrete strategies about how to write for young people.

I will return to this process again and again. For instance, I am writing fantasy right now. I have so many questions and things I need to learn. To learn from the children's writers who came before me, I will start at the beginning, articulate my focus question about fantasy, and work from there through it all again.

## Application in Craft

I wanted to share one example of how all of my work and learning for my essay has impacted my craft. I am currently writing a manuscript called *The Weaver and the Wildcat*, and in that my protagonist is Katharine. In this story, she forms a bond with a wildcat. Due to my research around animal companions in children's literature, that wildcat will remain wild: not domesticated with cat-like behaviour.

To illustrate how writing an essay affected my thinking and my own work, I will model how I might use an animal companion as metaphor. First, to showcase how it worked in *The Last Firefox* (2022), Newbery used the Firefox as a metaphor for the adoption process (Morris and Sedgman, 2022), which was key to the story's plot and theme. Today the wildcat is "on the brink of extinction in Scotland" (Saving Wildcats, 2022). I would like to use the wildcat in my own novel as a metaphor for persecution and the resilience to survive. I am interested in the balance between nature and humans and the relationship we have with nature. I am hoping that using the wildcat as a metaphor in that way will help the reader resonate with my themes and connect with my protagonist.

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### Author Biography

Sarah Currie Dyer grew up in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and lives in Bath, England, with her husband and two children. She graduated from Connecticut College where she studied English literature, creative writing, and studio art. After studying education at Lesley University, Sarah taught 7th Grade English for twelve years in the US and England. Currently, Sarah is a postgraduate student at Bath Spa University's Writing for Young People programme. She writes upper Middle Grade and Young Adult stories. Reading and writing are lifelong passions for Sarah. When she is not doing those, she loves spending time with her family, being outdoors, or painting.